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## Obama's Speech Resonates with Swing Voters

*President Connects on Wall Street, Economy and Solving the Country's Problems*

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In his first State of the Union address tonight, Barack Obama demonstrated a clear understanding of the problems facing the country and outlined a path forward that swing voters want to see their members of Congress follow. Especially in his understanding of the economic challenges we face, his aggressive stance on financial reform and bringing accountability to Wall Street, and his commitment to fighting for solutions to the country's problems, the president dispelled many doubts that had clouded attitudes toward him and rallied swing voters to his agenda for change. The challenge remains whether he can convince a visibly recalcitrant and divided Congress to act.

Democracy Corps conducted dial testing of the speech with 50 independent and weak partisan voters in Nevada, followed by focus group discussions with voters who shifted toward approval of Obama's performance in office. This difficult audience for Obama was a heavily Republican-leaning group (46 percent Republican, 20 percent Democratic) that split their votes in 2008 (52 percent Obama, 46 percent McCain) but had moved away from him over the past year, with majorities expressing disapproval with his job performance and unfavorable views of him on a personal level.

Obama saw a substantial, but not overwhelming, spike in his overall numbers with his personal favorability rating and job approval both increasing by 16 points. But his speech drove much bigger shifts among these initially skeptical swing voters on several key issues.

Most important, Obama managed to decisively reverse the view that he was too close to Wall Street. In a Democracy Corps survey from just before the Massachusetts election, we found that a 49 to 41 percent plurality said Obama and Democrats were more concerned with bailouts for Wall Street than creating jobs for regular Americans. Entering the evening, swing voters in this group agreed with a 48 to 16 percent plurality saying Obama "puts Wall Street ahead of the middle class." But after the speech, the number disagreeing with that statement jumped a remarkable 50 points, to 66 percent. Moreover, Obama saw a 38-point increase in support for his banking reform plan and a 40-point increase in the percent saying that he "stands up to special interests." Obama's strong words for the banks clearly resonated and generated



some of the strongest scores on our dials of the night from Democrats, Republicans and independents.

**Table 1: Shifts in Measures**

Measures	Pre-Speech	Post-Speech	Shift (Post – Pre-Speech)
<b>Obama Job Approval: Total Approve</b>	44	60	<b>+16</b>
<b>Obama on Economy and Jobs: Total Approve</b>	18	56	<b>+38</b>
<b>Obama Deficit Approval: Total Approve</b>	10	48	<b>+38</b>
<b>Banking Reform Plan: Total Support</b>	30	68	<b>+38</b>
<b>Puts Wall Street ahead of Middle Class: Total Describes Not Well</b>	16	66	<b>+50</b>
<b>Stands up to Special Interests: Total Describes Well</b>	20	60	<b>+40</b>
<b>Has Good Solutions to Country’s Problems: Total Describes Well</b>	30	66	<b>+36</b>
<b>Makes Me Feel Hopeful about the Future: Total Describes Well</b>	26	54	<b>+28</b>

Obama also scored well on the broader economy. His declaration that jobs had to be the country’s top priority this year generated an intensely enthusiastic reaction, and his proposals to create those jobs also met positive reviews, particularly his vow to end tax breaks for companies that outsource jobs, which saw the single highest rating of the night. Obama also came across as strong and, perhaps more important, credible on his plan to reduce spending and the deficits. The result was identical 38-point increases in these swing voters’ approval of the president on the economy and jobs and a on the federal budget deficits – the two issues voters most wanted to see addressed in Obama’s speech, according to a survey conducted by Public Opinion Strategies in conjunction with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for National Public Radio released this morning.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Poll conducted of 800 likely voters nationwide by Public Opinion Strategies in conjunction with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for National Public Radio, [January 20-21 and 23, 2010](#). Opinions in this memo do not necessarily reflect those of NPR or Public Opinion Strategies.



More generally, Obama was able to inspire a renewed confidence in his ability as a leader. His repeated assertions that he will not walk away from the issues at hand, as well as the optimism he displayed about better days ahead, carried over to the voters watching the speech. The president saw his ratings on having good solutions to the country's problems increase from 30 to 66 percent, while his ratings on making "me hopeful about the future" increased from 26 to 54 percent.

Following the speech, we conducted two breakout focus groups with participants who shifted from disapproving of President Obama's job performance before the speech to approving of his performance following the speech. These voters found the president's speech to be a strong articulation of the challenges facing the country and the path forward, viewing him as having the right priorities and working hard to get the country back on the right track.

These voters were especially pleased to see him express his anger about the behavior of banks that received bailouts, and they accepted the president's explanation that the banking bailouts were an unpleasant but necessary action for the government to take. These swing voters also focused on Obama's call to end tax breaks for companies that outsource jobs overseas and his pledge to double exports. They viewed these two issues as closely linked, emphasizing the fact that we need to start "making stuff" in America again if we are going to have any chance of increasing our exports.

For these voters whose attitudes shifted from disapproval to approval of Obama's performance as president, one consistent question remained: can he deliver? Unlike most attributes that shifted during the speech, "promises things that sound good but won't be able get them done" remained very high (78 percent pre-speech to 74 percent post-speech). The "shifters" in these post-speech focus groups are waiting for results, and they pointed specifically to passing health care reform and job creation initiatives as critical reforms that must be delivered. While they see the Republicans as obstructing every Obama initiative, they nonetheless expect Democrats to pass major legislation with their large majorities.

Obama faced dual missions tonight – addressing the concerns of independent voters and increasing the enthusiasm of Democrats, and our research suggests he was able to accomplish both. These swing voters are desperate for results and for actions that show their elected leaders in Congress are willing to rise above partisan and personal interests to address the country's many challenges. On Wall Street and the economy in particular, they are anxious to follow Obama's leadership and waiting for Congress to do the same.